
'A Great Ghastly Mistake'?: Approaches to Teenage Pregnancy in K. M. Peyton's *Pennington's Heir* and Berlie Doherty's *Dear Nobody*

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Nearly two decades separate the publication of K. M. Peyton's *Pennington's Heir* (1973) and Berlie Doherty's *Dear Nobody* (1991), both of which focus on the theme of teenage pregnancy. *Dear Nobody* won the Carnegie Medal, was shortlisted for four other book awards, and was adapted into a BBC television production and an award-winning play. By contrast, Peyton's *Pennington* novels are criticised for being 'often stereotypical in the depiction of character' (Knowles and Malmkjaer 1996, p.142). In this paper I argue that it is *Dear Nobody* that is at times conservative and regressive in its treatment of its central theme, while the earlier and less well received *Pennington's Heir* is the more socially progressive text.

Pennington's Heir was written in 1973, the end of a period Marwick (1984) labels 'The Cultural Revolution' (p. 163). The years from 1959 to 1973 in Britain, he says, were characterised by 'dislocation, though not destruction or transformation, of class, of race, of relations between the sexes, and between the youthful and the middle-aged' (p.163). This 'dislocation' was reflected in a new focus on social realism in the arts. Some British authors writing for older children followed the trend, addressing themes relevant to teenagers in realistic novels for that age group. Authors such as Josephine Kamm (*Young Mother* 1962) and Honor Arundel (*The Longest Weekend* 1969) wrote about teenage pregnancy some years before Peyton did, but it is Peyton who is singled out by Carpenter (1984) as being at the forefront of establishing the teenage novel in Britain.

The genre of young adult fiction developed more rapidly in the United States than in the United Kingdom. There were isolated earlier instances in both countries of what readers today would categorise as young adult novels, but it was J.D. Salinger's 1951 novel *The Catcher in the Rye* that gave rise to a host of imitations (Carpenter 1984, p. 518). These American 'problem novels' were often narrated in first person and focused almost entirely on adolescence and its associated problems such as sex and intergenerational tension (p.518), although Townsend (1990) points out that 'by the early eighties, parental iniquity was no longer a major theme' (p.274). There were marked differences between teenage fiction published during the 1970s in Britain and America, with the British novels often concerned with wider issues and related to more established

literary genres (Carpenter 1984, p.518). It was only in the 1980s that British problem novels began to more closely resemble their American counterparts. *Dear Nobody*, with its main theme of teenage pregnancy, its additional issues of divorce, mother-daughter conflict, and its first-person narration, had much in common with the earlier American young adult novels. In 1991, though, the problem novel was just developing into a fully-fledged genre in the UK. *Dear Nobody*'s attempt to address a social concern constructively and its representation of the young father's perspective were still relatively rare, and these factors together with the novel's literary merit must have contributed to its positive reception when it was published.

Attitudes to teenage sexuality became much more liberal in Britain between the 1970s and the 1990s, both in public policy and in private. A teenager who became pregnant in the 1970s would have had every reason to worry. The government officially disapproved of sex before marriage (Farrell 1978, p.18), and children born outside of marriage were considered illegitimate in law and stigmatised as a result. However, little was done to help teenagers take steps to avoid becoming pregnant. Schofield (1973) found that just 9% of working-class boys and 20% of girls in the late 1960s had received any formal sex education at school (p.25). By 1978, over half of all teenagers had still never learned about birth control in school (Farrell 1978, p. 44). For those who had, obtaining contraceptives was far from easy. In 1970, *Contraceptives: A 'Which?' Supplement* devoted a special section to 'the unmarried', explaining that: 'Some local authorities and FPA clinics are still not prepared to deal with unmarried people... Quite a lot of GPs are now prepared to help unmarried women... if you want to save the embarrassment of being refused, write or phone, and ask if he [sic] will help you' (p. 68).

If a young woman did become pregnant she might want to have an abortion, but termination was only an option if two doctors assessed her mental or physical health, or the health of the child, to be at risk. Her personal wishes were not taken into account, and, indeed, seemed of lesser consequence than her doctor's standing in the profession: 'The new Act does not allow for abortion on demand, and your doctor's reputation and job depend upon his [sic] interpreting the Act conscientiously' (*Which?* 1970, p. 71).

The overwhelming message to unmarried girls, therefore, was to just say 'no'.

In *Pennington's Heir*, Ruth Hollis has assimilated this message so thoroughly that when her boyfriend Patrick returns after nine months in prison she is able to disregard it only briefly:

The feeling grew between them, surging so quickly, so passionately, so perfectly, that there was never any question of Ruth withdrawing, doubting. Afterwards – because she knew she always doubted, was always knotted by her suburban hang-ups, her groundings, grinding, of conventional morality – she could not understand her own release. It was something she had never known was in her, this power to unlock herself from every minute of the 17 years of careful upbringing that had gone before. It would have terrified her if she had been in the mood to think about it in everyday blood.
(Peyton [1973] 1974, p.19)

Peyton does not present Ruth as a passive victim of Patrick's advances; nor, despite the acknowledgement that Ruth has transgressed conventional morality, does she suggest that she was wrong to do so. This message is reinforced when Patrick tells a broadly sympathetic adult that Ruth is pregnant:

'The poor little thing! Poor little Ruth! She's just a child.' ... She stopped herself by a great effort. But it was all in her pursed-up mouth and her censorious expression. Pat, taking his coffee, remembered Ruth's arms about him and the smell of the cold evening grass all bound up in their brief and beautiful and solitary moment of loving six weeks ago on the seawall, and wanted to shout at Clemmie, 'Poor Ruth! Poor Ruth!' There had been nothing poor about Ruth then, and she would be the first to acknowledge it.
(Peyton [1973] 1974, pp. 35-36).

At 17, Ruth would have had her first sexual experience rather earlier than most of her peers; in the early seventies the median age for first female intercourse was 20. (Coleman and Hendry 2002, p. 283). By the time *Dear Nobody* was written, it would have been odd for Helen Garton *not* to be having sex with her boyfriend, Chris. As Coleman and

Hendry (2002) point out, 'today we live in a society which is remarkably open about sexuality. Many of the taboos which operated 30 years ago have disappeared, and as a result sex is pervasive in our lives' (p.102). They suggest that this openness may be partly responsible for the fall in the early 1990s of the median age for first female intercourse to 16. At 18, however, Helen and Chris have not only not had sex before, they have not planned for the possibility, or even discussed it:

Maybe it was that something we had never dared talk about had been building up in us for weeks and took us by surprise and storm. It certainly wasn't calculated, that was for sure. Neither of us had known it would happen.

(Doherty [1991] 2001, p. 1)

Helen and Chris seem more like teenagers from their parents' generation than people growing up in an age where teenage sex is the norm. Although Helen displays physical symptoms of early pregnancy, is withdrawn and moody and responds evasively when he questions her odd behaviour, it never occurs to Chris that she might be pregnant. His naïveté seems inexplicable given that both teenagers are aware of the possible consequences of unprotected sex: 'We were so stupid! It's not as if we're a pair of kids.' (Doherty 2001, p. 31). In contrast, when Ruth tells Pat she is pregnant, he responds, 'But you can't – not just once', to which Ruth replies, 'I thought that too. Well, it's not true' (Peyton 1974, p. 29). Their ignorance is plausible given the social attitudes of the time; they would have been unlikely to have received any formal sex education.

The reactions of the girls' parents to news of the pregnancy are revealing. Both authors use the character of the mother, in particular, as a means of conveying their liberal views on teenage pregnancy, but their approach to doing so varies greatly and yields a very different result. Doherty uses the device of fragmentation (Knowles and Malmkjaer 1996, p. 47), which 'may take the form of expurgation of the other: creating an enemy within or without' (p. 57), to make Mrs Garton the villain of the piece. Helen thinks: 'I wish I could talk to her. I haven't been able to since I was a little girl, I don't know why. I don't think she loves me as much now that I'm grown up' (Doherty [1991] 2001, p.

41). According to Knowles and Malmkjaer, fragmentation ‘serves the ideological purpose in so far as it unites reader and writer against the undesirable characteristics of “the other” ’ (p. 57). In a comment on her website, Doherty confirms that she, certainly, disapproves of Mrs Garton’s lack of support for her daughter:

If Helen’s mother had been more supportive Helen would not have found herself in such a lonely situation and she wouldn’t have needed to write the Dear Nobody letters. Alice doesn’t represent all mothers but I certainly know some who would react in just the same way as she did.

(<http://www.berliedoherty.com>)

The use of first person narration helps to turn readers against Mrs Garton. They will almost certainly align themselves with Helen’s, and Doherty’s, beliefs, and reject those of Mrs Garton, who is aghast that her daughter has had sex: ‘And you’ve never heard of decency? Did you have to do it? After all I’ve taught you?’ (Doherty [1991] 2001, p. 61). She wants Helen and Chris to get married, puts pressure on Helen to have an abortion, and is undecided about whether she will allow her daughter to live at home after the baby is born.

Mother and daughter are eventually reconciled when Mrs Garton reveals that her opposition to Helen’s pregnancy is rooted in her own suffering as an illegitimate child. This gives Doherty the opportunity to highlight the positive changes society has made in its treatment of teenage mothers:

In those days an unmarried mother was no more than a slut. Her child was a disgrace. My mother’s family wouldn’t own her. She was an outcast, and so was I. A bastard, that’s what you were called if you didn’t have a father. That’s what I was called, when I was a child at school. That’s the start I had in life.

(Doherty [1991] 2001, p. 118)

In response, Helen tells her unborn child: ‘We have no choice about being born, little Nobody. I’ve made up your mind for you. It’s not a stigma any more, not like it was when Mum was a child. No one will be calling you names’ (p. 119).

Although at the time Doherty was writing her novel the Conservative government was attempting to reimpose the moral values of ‘discipline and restraint’ (Haste 2002, p.271), the message seemed to fall on deaf ears. Teenage pregnancy rates rose throughout the 1980s (Brook Advisory Centres), fewer young women felt compelled to marry the father of their baby, and the very term ‘illegitimacy’ had been legally removed from the children of unmarried mothers in the Legitimacy Act 1988. (Lees 1993, p.189). Given these developments, Doherty’s message, rather than breaking new ground, instead seems almost redundant.

Peyton does not use the opposition between mother and daughter as the primary means of conveying her message, as Doherty does. Instead, she creates distance between the reader and Ruth by using third person narration and several focalisers. These devices allow her liberal beliefs about teenage pregnancy to be conveyed via conceptual points of view. Although there is conflict between Ruth and her mother, Mrs Hollis is not as one-dimensional as Mrs Garton. Sometimes shrill and patronising, Mrs Hollis also displays occasional flashes of understanding:

What, for heaven’s sake, did Ruth have to be laughing about, shackling herself for life to a jobless young jailbird, with the child to tie her freedom right from the very first moment?... She could not help noticing that Pat did not appear to be sharing quite the same confidence. Or if he was, it wasn’t so evident. Poor young devil, she thought, with a quite irrelevant and completely out-of-place pang of sympathy. He was going to pay for his seduction with a vengeance! Ruth had assured her that they had only made love on the one occasion. There was, if you were dispassionate enough to stand back and appreciate it, a distinctly ironic and funny side to most of the common human dilemmas.

(Peyton [1973] 1974, pp. 41-42)

The Hollises are nearly a generation older than Mrs Garton, but are much more socially progressive. Mrs Hollis seems to feel that Ruth’s one sexual encounter is an excusable lapse, and she will allow Ruth to live at home with the baby as a single mother if necessary, although she laments: ‘The coming of a child should be a lovely thing, not a great ghastly mistake with ructions all round’ (p. 37). Mr Hollis replies

mildly: 'Fifty per cent of the population are great ghastly mistakes, and always have been, all through history' (p. 37). Furthermore, unlike Helen's mother, Ruth's parents are not convinced that their daughter should marry the father of her baby, although historically their positions probably would have been reversed. By 1993, 85% of teenage mothers were unmarried (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2000, p.3), while in the seventies, forced marriage was still the most common outcome for a pregnant teenager. In Farrell's 1978 study, 72% of the teenage mothers were married (p. 45). Furthermore, few teenagers at the time defied convention and had an illegitimate child (Schofield 1973, p.140). Nevertheless, Ruth's parents give her this option. Her father tells Pat: 'I don't think you ought to feel bound to go ahead with this marriage... Ruth's mother and I are not forcing you to marry Ruth, you understand. In fact we aren't sure whether it is the best solution at all' (Peyton [1973] 1974, p. 46).

The Hollises share the views of some progressive sociologists who, even in the 1970s, were suggesting that forced marriage was not the best option for pregnant teenagers. According to Farrell (1978), 'Forced marriages can constitute a far more serious threat to the stability and well being of society than the existence of increasing numbers of illegitimate children' (p. 23), while Schofield (1973) believed that marriage was 'often a poor solution to the problem of a premarital pregnancy' (p. 136). However, Peyton's teenage parents do marry, although this is not because of the author's own endorsement of conservative notions of morality. Ruth wants to marry the artistic Pat because she is besotted with him and has unrealistically romantic notions of married life that she is later forced to reassess. She is, though, well aware of the stigma she will face if he does not marry her. Even progressive sociologists at the time used negative terminology when discussing teenage pregnancy:

Like experimentation in drug-taking [pregnancy outside marriage] is a by-product of present day society which now affects sections of the community who in the past have been relatively immune to such manifestations of social deviance.

(Bourne 1971, p. 13)

In addition to forced marriage or single parenthood, a pregnant girl could also consider having an abortion. Ruth decides that she will have the baby whether or not Pat marries her, despite the inevitable opprobrium she will face if she does so. When she informs Patrick that she is pregnant she does not expect any commitment from him, but merely says, 'Only one thing: I'm not going to get rid of it, whatever you decide. I only wanted you to *know*' (Peyton [1973] 1974, p. 31). She pre-empts any discussion of the subject with her parents in the same way: 'One thing, I'm not giving up the baby, whatever happens' (p. 47). Although she chooses to have the baby, she is not against abortion in principle, musing: 'If she had had an abortion, she could have married him just the same and gone out to work and supported him while he got started, and there would have been no worries' (p. 69).

Ruth's decision to have her baby seems unrelated to the author's position on abortion, which remains unknown. Helen's decision, however, is inextricably linked to it, for alongside her otherwise liberal views, Doherty reveals her opposition to abortion in her text. Although Helen's family wants her to terminate her pregnancy, Chris's family is in favour of her keeping the baby. When he finds out that Helen is pregnant, Chris writes a letter begging her not to abort the foetus:

It's my baby too. It's a little egg. It's life itself... Two hundred million sperm tried to reach you and this is the one that made it. Nothing will ever be exactly like it again, ever, ever, in the world. It is unique. It is me in you, Helen, and you in me. Please don't destroy it.

(Doherty [1991] 2001, p. 64)

His letter uses similar language to that of the anti-abortion rhetoric employed by pro-life organisations: 'A new life actually begins in the womb... At fertilisation (conception), a new, unique, living human individual is present. He or she is not part of the mother any more than he or she is part of the father' (SPUC, n.d.).

Helen agrees to have an abortion, but changes her mind at the last minute. After leaving the clinic she sees Chris's aunt Jill, who has witnessed her early attempt to miscarry by being thrown from a horse. Helen thinks:

How could I have done that to you, little Nobody, that monstrous thing? I was another person then, slightly mad, I think, a frightened little girl, an animal in a trap... I wanted to tell her about my escape, our escape, from that clinic place.

(Doherty [1991] 2001, p. 121)

The choice of words – ‘monstrous’, ‘mad’, ‘animal’ – suggests that someone who terminates a pregnancy is either not quite human or has mental health issues. Rather than simply referring to ‘the clinic’, Helen uses implicitly pejorative language – ‘that clinic place’. Her desire to tell Jill of her experience suggests that Chris’s aunt will approve of her decision. Jill herself terminated a pregnancy years ago and, in recounting her story, hints that she regrets her choice, revealing that ‘he would be nearly 15 now’ (p. 57).

Helen’s decision to have the baby, but not marry its father is in keeping with ever-rising numbers of young women who make the same choice in real life. Helen will live at home and raise her child with her mother’s help: Mrs Garton’s confession has led to a change of heart towards the baby. With all tension resolved, the story shifts into soft focus and happy endings. As Reynolds (1994) says, ‘At this point familiar forces come into play: the...child takes on the old romantic role and brings together the generations’ (p.47):

When I finished feeding Amy and was just about to put her down, all milky-sweet and sleepy, Mum came over and took her from me. She just kissed her, the way she does, and then she walked back across the room and put her in Nan’s arms. It was as though Amy was a fine thread being drawn through a garment, mending tears.

(Doherty [1991] 2001, p. 152)

Doherty’s didactic intention throughout *Dear Nobody* is undoubtedly to validate and de-stigmatise the decision of pregnant teenagers who choose to have and raise their baby as lone parents. Nevertheless, its closed ending highlights a conservatism that contradicts its apparently liberal message. Doherty minimises the sacrifices that Helen will have to make until they seem not to exist. The conclusion fails to acknowledge the fact that Helen’s decision to keep her

baby will drastically harm her plans for the future. Helen is academically exceptional and a talented composer who is apparently passionate about her music. She has been offered a full scholarship to study at the prestigious Royal Northern College of Music. In order to keep her baby, she must relinquish her scholarship and abandon her career hopes. She does so without expressing a single regret over her lost opportunity, and with only a vague idea of pursuing her education at an inferior institution at some undefined future date. Helen and her mother are left to look after the baby, while Chris, like many young men before him, realises that, after all, he is not mature enough to handle the responsibilities of fatherhood, and goes off to university as planned, his future unaffected by his experience. Helen’s mother accepts without a murmur what Ruth’s mother railed against 17 years before when she asked, ‘[if] Ruth is left with the baby, who is going to be saddled with the job of looking after it? Tell me that! It will be me, of course’ (Peyton [1973] 1974, p. 38).

The psychological closure in *Dear Nobody* is absent in *Pennington’s Heir*, for despite Ruth’s naïve optimism, Peyton does not romanticise married life for the young couple. They live in a squalid bedsit and have no money to buy basic equipment for the baby. Patrick, just beginning to build his musical career, must work 15 hours a day to fit in his music and earn enough to live on. Ruth works until she is too heavily pregnant to continue and then begins again shortly after the baby is born. Patrick is resentful, feeling that Ruth

would be taken up with the wretched brat that he had no money to support. The check in his pocket would just about pay last week’s and next week’s rent, and buy the list of baby equipment that he could put off no longer; and then they were back to normal – penniless.

(Peyton [1973] 1974, p. 126)

Motherhood makes Ruth grow up; she knows that her life will be difficult even if Patrick is successful, and comes, reluctantly, to realise that in some ways her mother was right. While at the novel’s close Patrick is on the brink of a breakthrough in his career, the future of Pat and Ruth’s marriage is less clear. Although there is love in the marriage, there is also hardship and conflict.

While Peyton acknowledges the difficult realities of teenage motherhood, Doherty downplays them in order to support the liberal position that both authors take: that teenage pregnancy is not the social ill it was once considered to be. In doing so, however, Doherty reveals views that are, at times, reactionary and anti-feminist. Furthermore, in the context of a society which itself has liberalised over the years, her progressive stance is not nearly as radical as Peyton's. Nearly two decades on, *Dear Nobody* is not a great advance on *Pennington's Heir*; it is, at best, a small step sideways.



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